
Rwanda (episode 3)

The arts and the representation of the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda

Rwanda (épisode 3) : Les Arts et la représentation du génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda

Rwanda (aflevering 3): De voorstelling van de genocide van de Tutsi's in de Kunsten

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1409>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.1409

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2014

Number of pages: 184-186

ISBN: 978-2-84174-688-0

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Rémi Korman, « Rwanda (episode 3) », *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 119 | 2014, Online since 01 January 2016, connection on 23 October 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1409> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.1409>

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Herinnerings-
labo



◆ Door **Rémi Korman**, EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales). Korman reist regelmatig naar Rwanda voor zijn onderzoek naar de genocide van de Tutsi's en het herinneringswerk daarrond. Samen met de vereniging Ibuka in Lyon zet hij eveneens projecten op om die herinnering levendig te houden.

◆ Deze terugkerende rubriek moet inzicht verschaffen in de processen van herinneringsconstructie na 1994. Daarbij wordt rekening gehouden met de specifieke kenmerken van het herinneringsmodel in Rwanda, maar er is ook aandacht voor verbanden met studies over de Shoah, de Armeense genocide of de genocide in Cambodja.

Rwanda

(A F L E V E R I N G 3)

THE ARTS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GENOCIDE OF THE TUTSI IN RWANDA

How can the genocide be represented? This question, generally raised in regard to the Shoah, has been the object of numerous debates between the partisans of an “unrepresentability” and others who consider it necessary to have *images despite everything*.¹ This philosophical and aesthetic reflection also exists in Rwanda after 1994, but in other terms.

To begin, the modalities of the crime generate very different representations of the genocide. After the Shoah the question of the disappearance of the victims' bodies was raised, but also the distancing of the massacre sites in relation to the places of residence, in particular for Western European Jews. The Rwandan case is marked on the contrary by the extreme materiality of the massacres, as bodies lay strewn over the country after the genocide. And the question in Rwanda is not about

representing what the genocide was, but rather about asking what future is possible in a country where an extreme majority of the children either saw or suffered from the massacres, or both (Dyregrov et al. 2000).

To continue, it should be noted that in Rwanda there is an important gap between the “visual arts”, basically nonexistent, and “an exceptionally rich oral literature” (Smith 1985). In effect, memory of the genocide has principally been expressed through song since 1994 (see Kerstens 2007). There are however a few Rwandan visual artists who have sought to represent the genocide visually, despite everything. The works of these artists oscillate between hyper-realism and an attempted symbolization of the massacres.

A TRAUMATIC ART OR THE DIFFICULTY OF SYMBOLIZING THE GENOCIDE

In 1995, the Rwandan State organized in collaboration with Unicef an artistic contest throughout the coun-



— Drawing of John Tugirimana. Contest for a national symbol representing the genocide, 1995.



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try to find a national symbol that would represent the genocide. Close to sixty drawings were thus sent by secondary pupils, but also by adult artists. Carried out less than a year after the massacres, they showed the difficulty in representing the genocide in any other way beside its radical violence. Extremely raw, they showed tortured corpses and the different weapons used by the killers, but also the omnipresence of blood and bones in 1994. Though more artistic than Rwandan children's drawings on the genocide, these works nevertheless contained a traumatic dimension (see Baqué 2000; Janzen & Janzen 2000; Salem 2000).

Certain artists however were able during this contest to propose a more politicized view on the genocide. This was namely the case for John Tugirimana who highlighted with his drawing the role of Rwandan political authorities in the organization of the genocide: behind a drum, the symbol of power in Rwanda, a man incites toward crime via the media and distributes weapons to the population. At the end of this contest, several works were selected by a jury. However a symbol was not chosen. It was still too early, one year after the genocide, to propose a unified meaning to the event.

Finally, and though his proposition was not chosen by the jury, sculptor Jean-Baptiste Sebukangaga became the main artist about the genocide. This is undoubtedly due to his very unique profile. The co-founder in 1962 of the first and unique art school of the country, at Nyundo, he is considered as the main Rwandan sculptor since the end of the colonial era. After the genocide of the Tutsi, which he survived, he was commissioned by the Rwandan State to work on monument-memorial projects. He created in this way numerous works, including the monument that was installed in 1998 at the Kanombe airport in Kigali at the occasion of Bill Clinton's first visit to Rwanda. It is worth noting that such a monumentalization is rare in Rwanda, as memorials are for the most part deprived of sculptures or artistic representation.²

Thereafter, at the end of the 1990s, new artists emerged, some of whom had been to the art school at Nyundo before it was destroyed in 1994, and others from the Tutsi Diaspora who had returned to the country. Disorganized, the artistic field took shape at the begin-

(1) According to Georges Didi-Huberman's expression. Regarding the question of the representation of the genocide of the Tutsi and more generally the limits of representation, I refer to Nathan Réra's works (2014).

(2) We denote however a few exceptions, like at the Mugonero memorial. On this point, see Dumas & Korman 2011.

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... ning of this century and, in 2006, the art museum of Rwesero was opened near the previous royal capital, Nyanza. This space proposes exhibitions of art works, some of which deal specifically with the genocide of the Tutsi (see Winters 2012). Despite everything, these works remain quantitatively unimportant, but also qualitatively. A certain number of them only represent weapons and corpses, as the artists find it difficult to propose a symbolic representation.

In 2009, the Rwandan State acquired an official emblem of the memory of the genocide. Composed of a flame, the

– Sculpture of
Jean-Baptiste
Sebukangaga
installed at
the Kanombe
airport in
Kigali.

© Personal archives of Jean-Baptiste Sebukangaga



– Shadow,
The Upright Men.

symbol for memory and hope, it now adorns all communication tools on the genocide. However, this memorial symbol was in fact borrowed from the AEGIS Foundation, an English organization that works on questions relating to memory in Rwanda.

A LIVING MEMORY OF THE GENOCIDE: THE UPRIGHT MEN BY BRUCE CLARKE

Facing the difficulty of Rwandan visual artists to propose a symbolic representation of the genocide, it is hard not to mention the works by South African artist Bruce Clarke. For the twentieth commemoration of the genocide, he proposed to revive the victims and to give them back their dignity. His project, titled “The Upright Men”, positioned itself in opposition to the artistic representations of the genocide in Rwanda, marked by the omnipresence of bones and corpses. It should be noted that this same artist put together at the end of the 1990s a memorial project titled “Jardin de la mémoire” [Garden of memory], that was made up of one million stones so as to symbolize the victims of the genocide. This memorial was opened in 2009 at the occasion of the fifteenth national commemoration. It was placed at the headquarters of the survivors association Ibuka, on the site at Nyanza, Kicukiro.

Twenty years after the genocide, and since the reopening of the art school at Nyundo, a new generation of Rwandan artists are beginning to be trained and it can be thought that they will renew the artistic forms pertaining to the memory work in Rwanda. ■

© Bruce Clarke, le Collectif pour les Hommes débout, 2012, www.uprightmen.org

